

MEHBOOB KHAN

On the 94th birth anniversary of this icon of Indian filmmaking, 'g' pays a tribute to Mehboob Khan. India's answer to De Mille.

Born: In a village named Sarar in Gujarat on January 1, 1906. Son of a policeman, Mehboob was interested in movies from childhood. Twice he ran away to Bombay in quest of the mystery of the silver screen. Both the times he was brought back home forcibly. The second time it happened Mehboob was forced to marry.

Real Name: Ramjan Khan.

First Brush With Acting: At the age of 21 Mehboob became a junior artiste at the Imperial Studios in Bombay. Acted as a 'face in the crowd' in crowd scenes for three years.

First Major Break: As one of the forty thieves in the Imperial Studios' *Alibaba & Forty Thieves* directed by B.P. Mishra. Next role was in R.S. Choudhury's

Morye Patang. Mehboob got his first close-up shot in 1929 in *Shirin Kusr*.

Changeover: Moved from Imperial Studios to Sagar Movietone. Secured the villain's role in Sagar Movietone's *Madcap* in 1935. By now Mehboob had moved from the silent films to talking parts in minor romantic capers.

Little-known fact: Mehboob Khan was

tipped to play the hero's role in India's first Talkie *Alam Ara*. Even his costumes were ready. But at the last minute the superstar Master Vithal was asked to step-in.

Applause As Actor: Won rave reviews for portraying the hero's father in Sarvottam Badami's *Vengeance Is Mine* in 1935.

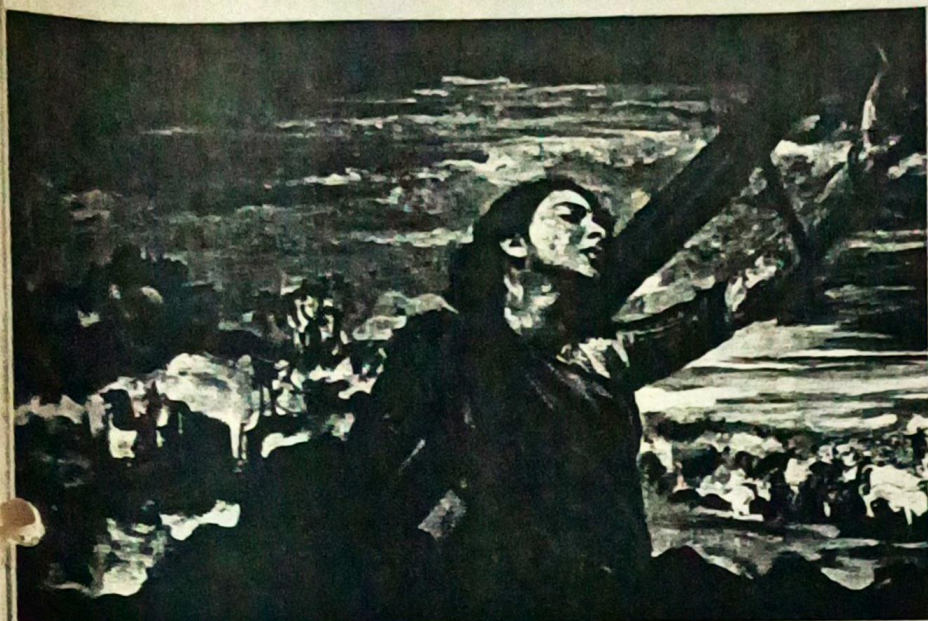
Directorial Debut: In 1935 with Sagar Movietone's *Judgement*

Of Allah. A period film, it narrated the story of the Roman empire in a style that was flamboyant and fantasy-filled. The hit film was photographed by Fareedon Irani who went on to be the cinematographer of all of Mehboob's films.

Second Film: *Deccan Queen* was Mehboob's only stunt film. The genre came to Sagar Movietone, courtesy Mehboob. The film also



INDIA'S DE MILLE!



— *Mother India.*

had a heroine (Aruna Devi) in a double role for the first time, and introduced the singing star Surendra to the screen.

First Woman-oriented Film: In Manmohan (1936) Mehboob Khan cast Bibbo as an orphan caught in a tumultuous love triangle with two suitors. The film ran for a record breaking fifty weeks at the Imperial Cinema in Bombay and consolidated the reputations of star Surendra and music director Anil Biswas.

Jagirdar: In 1937 Mehboob Khan repeated the successful pair of Surendra and Bibbo in Jagirdar. The story of a husband

presumed dead in a shipwreck who returns to claim paternity rights over his wife's child predated Jon Amiel's *Sommersby* of the Nineties.

Hum Tum Aur Woh: In 1938 was a triangular love tale featuring Motilal, Maya and Rose in leading roles. Mehboob's favourite actress Bibbo

reappeared the same year in Mehboob's patriotic *Watan*. This film too was a box-office hit.

1939: Ek Hi Raasta advocated socialism and Mehboob's *Roti* expanded on the theme.

1940: The Year of Aurat, Sardar Akhtar who was to later become the second Mrs. Mehboob Khan was a chorus



— *Sardar Akhtar and Kanhaiyalal in Aurat.*

dancer struggling to get a leading role. In *Aurat* Mehboob gave Sardar Akhtar a dream break. To be later remade as the legendary *Mother India*, *Aurat* starred Sardar Akhtar as the long-suffering mother of the soil who battles poverty, lechery and immorality to bring up her two sons decently.

1941: The year of Bahen — the tale of the possessive brother played by Sheikh Mukhtar who won't let his little sister Nalini Jaywant live her life away from his jealous eyes. The film was read by many critics to convey incestuous overtones. Mehboob was powerfully attracted to women in all their social roles as wife, mother, and sister. *Bahen* typified the sexual ambiguities that eventuated from Mehboob's passion for the fair sex.

1942: Roti was Mehboob's powerful message-oriented film counterposing capitalism with communism. The film featured the famous Ghazal singer Begum Akhtar in the role of Darling, a prostitute who hates the capitalist pig while willingly being his sex object.

1943: A momentous year in the fabulously successful career of Mehboob Khan. It was in this year that the director worked with Nargis for the first time. In *Taqdeer* she played Salma, a girl who gets lost in the Kumbh Mela and is brought up by Seth Badriprasad (Charlie).

1945: Hollywood's champ of the epic, Cecil B. DeMille described Mehboob's *Humayun*, the spectacle on the life of the Mughal emperor (Ashok Kumar) as "a masterpiece of lighting and composition." Mehboob's work remained influenced by the grandeur and technique of De Mille to the end.

1946: One of Mehboob's biggest blockbusters prior to *Mother India*, *Anmol Ghadi*, featured a love triangle between Chander (Surendra), Lata (Noor Jehan) and Basanti (Suraiya). Naushad's music for Noorjehan topped by the vigorously poignant 'Awaz de kahan hai' added to the film's appeal.

1949: Billo was long gone from favour. In *Andaz* Mehboob's new favourite Nargis bedazzled audiences as



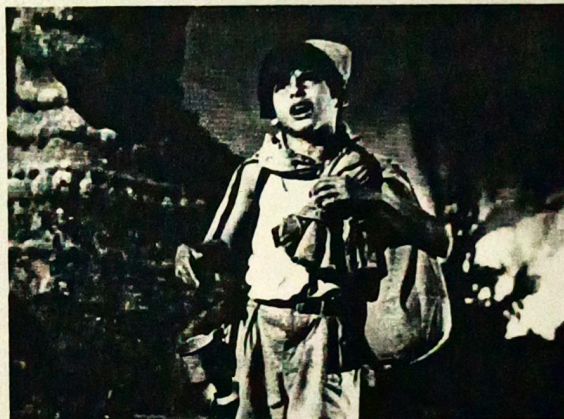
— Dilip Kumar, Raj Kapoor and Nargis in *Andaz*.

the Modern Miss Neeta who gets entangled in the passions of two handsome men. The trendy lady gives out wrong signals to the intense Dilip (Dilip Kumar) who wrecks her marriage to the debonair Rajan (Raj Kapoor). The film brought together the two superstars of the fifties — Dilip K. and Raj K. for the first and last time. Only Mehboob Khan could accommodate large egos, like these, in one film. Naushad's music touched the skies when the young Lata sang like a nightingale for Nargis.

1952: *Aan*, Mehboob's first film in colour was a swashbuckling extravaganza about a Rajput prince (Dilip Kumar)'s love for the princess Mangala (Nimmi) and his efforts to keep a hold on his kingdom. It was the first Indian film to be

shot in technicolour. *Aan* heralded the era of wide-screen entertainment with enough dazzle to reach out to an international audience.

1957: *Mother India* was Mehboob's career's most cherished dream come true. A



— Sajid in *Son of India*.

monumental motion picture it is reggraded by many critics and most movie lovers as the *Indian Gone With The Wind* and *The Good Earth* combined. A remake of Mehboob's *Aurat* it stars Nargis in

one of the best performances of Indian cinema. Her struggle to raise her children with dignity and pride in an increasingly hostile world became a role model for many generations of Indian films to come. To this day *Mother India* remains the only film to be shortlisted for the Oscar for best foreign film.

1962: *Son Of India* was Mehboob's last film. A creative decline had set into his career due to failing health. Mehboob died of a heart attack on May 28, 1964 leaving behind a virtual

encyclopaedia named *Mother India* on how to make a historic blockbuster, not to mention several other path-breaking box-office bonanzas.

— SUBHASH K. JHA **g**